



*Tim Groves*

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Are there bass in the tidal Patuxent River?" is a question frequently asked by people looking for new fishing opportunities in Maryland. The answer is definitely "yes."

Until recently, few have known that there is a good population of largemouth bass (and some smallmouth) in the Patuxent to challenge the avid angler, but word is spreading. Before you hook up your boat and go however, there are a few things you should know.

### **The early days**

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Largemouth bass likely found their way into the Patuxent River soon after their introduction into the state in the mid-1800s. Although little early data is available, populations probably fluctuated with submerged aquatic vegetation (sav) or bay grass abundance, as they did in other Maryland tidal fresh waters.

In the early 1980s, surveys found bass in the river but not in great numbers. While downed trees, old docks and other structures provided suitable habitat for adult fish, poor spawning success was believed the major factor limiting the size of the population.

Furthermore, the tidal fresh area of the Patuxent had a reputation for heavy tidal flows, steep edges and shallow marshes often exposed on low tides — of limited value as spawning habitat. Compounding the problem, bay grasses had begun to disappear in the mid-1960s. High turbidity from development and agricultural runoff, along with heavy nutrient loading, were also taking their toll. In 1972, Hurricane Agnes destroyed the remaining SAV by greatly increasing the sediment load in the river. These grasses would take years to recover.

### **Stocking efforts**

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The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Fisheries Service began stocking 3/4-inch to 1 1/2-inch largemouth bass in the tidal Patuxent in the early 1980s with the intent of creating a put and grow fishery. Mortality of these small fish was apparently very high, with predation from striped bass, yellow and white perch and other species believed to be a major problem.

By 1988, more than 430,000 largemouth bass fry and fingerlings had been released into the river and its tributaries. And while some bass survived to quality size, the hoped-for population increase did not occur. Stocking was temporarily discontinued

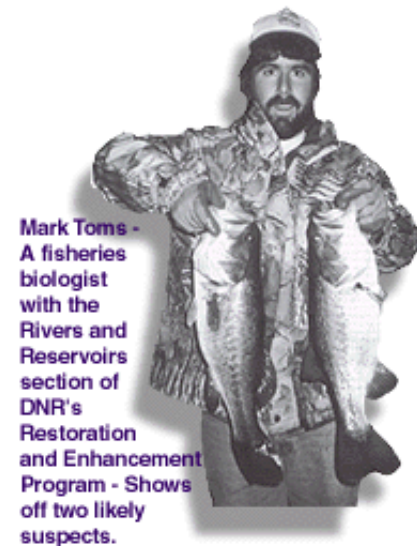
and the project was reevaluated.

## Phase II

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In 1993 a Phase II stocking plan was added. This plan consisted of raising a portion of each year's bass to the 2- to 4-inch range before stocking. These larger fingerlings were marked with coded wire tags to enable better evaluation of effectiveness.

Between 1993 and 1997, 46,276 of 257,185 bass stocked were tagged fingerlings. Their survival rate was sufficient that significant numbers were recaptured during routine sampling. In 1998, it was decided that only tagged bass would be stocked in the future, allowing for more accurate assessments of natural reproduction and of the hatchery fish contributions to the adult population.



In addition to the change in stocking strategy, some welcome environmental changes began to occur in the river. During the early to mid-1990s, grass beds began to emerge from sediments covering much of the Patuxent's littoral zone (near the shore). From a few scattered plants, SAV beds formed, bordering much of the river shoreline and becoming particularly abundant in the tributaries.

Along with these grasses came an increase in numbers and varieties of minnows, small fish and crustaceans that provide the forage base for larger predators. The grasses also increased the amount of suitable spawning habitat by slowing currents and reducing suspended sediments.

Today, species such as chain pickerel, which were uncommon 10 years ago, now show up consistently in routine sampling and are again spawning successfully in the river basin.

To determine the status of the Patuxent bass population and the success of Phase II stocking, intensive sampling began in 1994. Fall population sampling estimates (when bass are most easily collected), were calculated for 150 acres within optimum habitat. Estimates indicated the population had more than doubled, from 700 in 1994 to near 1700 in 1997.

We also learned that Western Branch, the largest tributary in the area, serves as an excellent nursery area for fingerlings, with population estimates jumping from almost 600 fish in 1996 to more than 1100 in 1997. While this number is impressive, most fish in Western Branch are less than 10 inches, and are not always in the creek. Bass migrate back and forth between the river and creeks, following food and optimal temperatures.

Our 1998 monitoring effort revealed many untagged young, indicating successful natural reproduction. The majority of these wild fish were found in small tributaries

with good grass beds and favorable cover. Thirty-seven percent of all ages collected were tagged, although actual hatchery contributions are believed to be greater given the unmarked stockings of earlier years.

It will take three to five more years of supplemental stocking and evaluation to determine if the Patuxent River bass population can support itself – a Fisheries Service goal – but the outlook is very encouraging.

## Let's go fishing

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The majority of Patuxent bass are found in a small area – similar in size to the Potomac's Mattawoman Creek – in typical tidal habitat. Concentrations can be found from the downed trees near Waysons Corner, south to the marshes near Nottingham, and in tributaries as far downstream as Benedict and beyond.

While shore anglers catch some bass, the best fishing is from a boat. A large boat isn't necessary to fish this portion of the river, and many prefer to fish via canoe or jon boat, but beware: the winds can pick up pretty quickly and the chop can get quite large for a river of this size.

There are two excellent boat ramps within Patuxent River Park on Croom Airport Road, with good parking and a fishing pier. It is advisable to take a scouting trip before fishing, to learn what structure, drop-offs, grass beds and stands of lily pads are available. Begin at either boat ramp and venture upstream to about a mile beyond Hills Bridge at Waysons Corner, or head downstream to Nottingham.

Don't overlook the creeks and guts that drain into the river – some may surprise you, particularly if they contain structure like grass beds and beaver lodges.

For the truly adventurous, there are other boat ramps down river, beyond the main river population but close to some fair-sized creeks containing bass. Keep in mind that during a drought year, the salinity often encroaches on habitat, causing bass to move upstream to more favorable environments.

Your best bet is to fish late summer through late fall. Largemouth in the Patuxent are sometimes difficult to catch in spring and early summer, disappearing from easy-to-reach places and moving into smaller creeks and marshes (areas only accessible by canoe at high tide) to spawn. During winter months, most bass are caught in the river's deep holes.

The average size of Patuxent bass is 12 inches and a pound or less, but a 3 to 4 pound fish or even a 6-pounder is not uncommon. (Occasionally, we see a smallmouth bass up to 3 pounds.) Tidal bass typically have a more short, stout shape than those you find in a lake, reservoir or pond. Abundant forage and strong tidal flow make them tough, well-conditioned fighters.

## Plenty of fish in the sea...

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If you get tired of catching bass or if they just aren't biting, there are many other species in the Patuxent that can save the day.

You may encounter the toothy chain pickerel almost anywhere you fish for bass. They occupy similar habitat and eat the same types of food, so be careful when grabbing that bass by the lip – it might have a sharp set of dentures!

Striped bass also inhabit the river and are caught on the same lures you would use for bass. Some are large and can make for an exciting time if you hook into one.

White and yellow perch are also abundant and are commonly pursued by local fishing enthusiasts.

Black and white crappie (mainly black) can be found while fishing some of the dense brush piles and trees along the shore. These average 10 to 12 inches long and are fun to catch on light tackle.

Channel catfish, brown bullhead and white catfish are the three main whiskery fish found in the Patuxent. They are not too particular about what you tie on your line and will at times snack on a crankbait, rubber worm or even a surface bait.

If you get bored easily, the real tackle tester in the Patuxent is the carp. I know what you're thinking, "who in their right mind wants to catch a carp?" But the carp is an extremely strong fighter and the Patuxent has more than its fair share of them, some exceeding 40 pounds. Carp can be caught on corn, dough balls or just about any bait that has some scent. You need patience when fishing for carp; leave your line still so they can use the scent to find your bait. Also, tread lightly in that boat or on the bank; carp are very wary and can sense the vibrations.

If you have enough determination, and enjoy catching a variety of fish, there is an excellent chance of having a good day on the Patuxent. Now go hook up your boat, head to the river and have a good time. v

If you're planning on fishing the Patuxent by way of Patuxent River Park, boat launching fees apply: Maryland residents can purchase a \$25 permit for the entire year. Daily permits are \$5 for Prince George's County residents and \$7 for all others. The park also sells a nice map of the river. It's not topographic, but shows the contours and tributaries, a help if you're unfamiliar with the river. For more information about ramp fees or park hours, contact the park at 301-627-6074. For more information on fishing the Patuxent, contact the DNR Fisheries Service - Southern Region at 301-888-2423.

For more information about fishing in Maryland check out [www.dnr.state.md.us/fisheries](http://www.dnr.state.md.us/fisheries)

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